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ABSTRACT

This outline of Bengali grammar is presented in five major sections: (1) noun, (2) verb, (3) noun phrase, (4) verb phrase, and (5) the sentence. Linguistic examples frequently are provided in order to illustrate grammatical generalizations. (RL)

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Outline of Bengali Grammar

Sheila Jasanoff

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Transcription: The symbols used are essentially self-explanatory. The dotted series (ṭ, ṭh, etc.) is alveolar rather than retroflex, ɛ, ɔ are low mid vowels, and bh, dh, etc., are voiced aspirates. /s/ is pronounced [ʃ] except before dentals.

I. The Noun

1. Human nouns and pronouns are marked for both number and case. The four cases are the direct, oblique, genitive and locative.

	Direct	Oblique	Genitive	Locative	
Pronoun					
Sg.	o	oke	or	ote	o='he'
Pl.	ora	oder	oder	--	
Noun					
Sg.	chele	cheleke	cheler	chelete	chele='boy'
Pl.	chelera	cheleder	cheleder	--	

2. Non-human pronouns may be either abstract or concrete and are declined as follows:

FL 002 207

	Direct	Oblique	Genitive	Locative
Abstract	ta	take	tar	tate
Concrete				
Sg.	(eṭa, oṭa, seṭa)	(e-, o-, seṭake)	(e-, o-, seṭar)	(e-, o-, seṭate)
Pl.	egulo, ogulo, segulo	e-, o-, seguloke	e-, o-, segulor	e-, o-, segulote

The concrete pronouns consist of the demonstrative adjectives e 'this', o 'that' and se 'that (remote)' plus the definite article ta in the singular and in the plural the collective article gulo.

3. Non-human nouns are only optionally marked for number (using the collective article gulo, e.g., boi 'book(s)', boigulo 'books'). Non-human nouns are not generally marked as obliques but are so marked optionally when they are definite and obligatorily when they appear in constructions in which they have a complement. Thus

boiṭa(ke) rakho 'Keep the book'
book the keep

eṭake ki bɔle 'what does one call this'
this what calls

ami ei pathortake hire mone kori 'I consider this stone a
I this stone diamond consider diamond'

II. The Verb

1. Primary Verbs

1.1. Finite Forms: The verb in Bengali is inflected for person but not number. There are two verb classes, the simple stem class (Class I) and the augmented stem class (Class II). Only third person forms are given in the paradigms below:

	Class I: Stem kɔr--'do'		Class II: Stem chɔra--'scatter'	
Present	o kɔre	'he does'	o chɔrae	'he scatters'
Present Imperfect	o korche	'he is doing'	o chɔraeche	'he is scattering'
Present Perfect	o koreche	'he has done'	o chorieche	'he has scattered'
Past	o korlo	'he did'	o chɔralo	'he scattered'
Past Imperfect	o korchilo	'he was doing'	o chɔracchilo	'he was scattering'
Past Perfect	o korechilo	'he had done'	o choriechilo	'he had scattered'
Past Frequentative	o korto	'he used to do'	o chɔrato	'he used to scatter'
Future	o korbe	'he will do'	o chɔrabe	'he will scatter'
Present Imperative	ko uk	'let him do'	chɔrak	'let him scatter'

1.2. Non-Finite Forms

Verbal Noun -- This is the citation form of the verb.

kɔra 'doing' chɔrano 'scattering'

The alternate forms korba-, chɔraba- do not regularly occur without a case marker, e.g., korbar 'of doing'.

Past Participle

Passive	kɔra 'done'	chɔrano 'scattered'

This participle coincides formally with the verbal noun.

Active	kore 'having done'	chorie 'having scattered'
Infinitive	korte 'to do'	chɔrate 'to scatter'
Present Participle	korte 'doing'	chɔrate 'to scatter'
Conditional Participle	korte 'if (one) does'	chɔrate 'if (one) scatters'

This participle qualifies a noun or pronoun of any person in the direct case: o korte 'if he does', ami korte 'if I do'. Uses of these forms will be discussed in the section on syntax.

2. Causatives

Causative verbs constitute the only synthetic derived category in Bengali. They are formed productively only from verbs of Class I. The causative stem is derived by adding -a to the stem of the primary verb (-wa when the latter ends in a vowel), e.g., kɔr- 'do', kɔra 'cause to do', kha- 'eat', khawa- 'cause to eat'. Causatives are conjugated like verbs of Class II.

3. Compound Verbs

These are of three principal types.

3.1. Noun and Primary Verb

Many very common verbs in Bengali consist of one of a highly

restricted set of primary verbs (particularly kɔra 'to do', dewa 'to give', khawa 'to eat') plus a direct object. Thus

bɛbohar 'use (n.)' + kɔra = bɛbohar kɔra 'to use'

bhɔe "fear (n.)' + khawa = bhɔe khawa 'to get frightened'

Verbs of this sort tend to function like single lexical items. For instance, a transitive compound verb like bɛbohar kɔra can take a direct object like any transitive primary verb, e.g., boi bɛbohar kɔra 'to use a book'. Apart from causative formation (discussed above), compounding nouns with kɔra is the closest thing Bengali has to a productive process of verb derivation. An interesting extension of this process is the borrowing of verbs from English. The unmarked English verb fills the slot of the noun, and examples like phon kɔra 'to telephone' and maind kɔra 'to mind' are extremely common in colloquial Bengali.

3.2. Past Active Participle and Primary Verb

In the preceding class of compound verbs the primary verbs kɔra, khawa, etc., are essentially meaningless elements serving only to derive verbs from existing nouns. In this class, on the other hand, the primary verb functions as an aspect marker (generally perfective) in more or less the same way as English prepositions in verbs like 'to eat up', 'to run off'. Thus:

Khawa 'to eat' and phɛla 'to drop' ⇒ khee phɛla 'to eat up'
harano 'to lose' and jawa 'to go' ⇒ harie jawa 'to get lost'

These formations are in a sense idiomatic, since the meaning of the compound verb is not predictable from the lexical meaning of its components, but there is a certain amount of regularity in that all verbs with phɛla, for instance, have the same connotation of completed action. This type of composition is a special case of verb concatenation in conjoined sentences (see below).

3.3. Noun and Primary Verb (Impersonal)

Many verbs of feeling, sensation, etc., belong to this class. They are used in impersonal constructions in which what would be the grammatical subject in English appears in the genitive case. Thus we have the verb mathabɛtha kɔra 'to have a headache' (=matha 'head' and betha 'pain' and kɔra 'do') in a sentence like:

amar mathabɛtha kɔrche 'I have a headache'
of me headache does

The syntactic relations that obtain among the constituents in sentences of this sort is not transparent and will be reserved for later discussion. In particular, it must be noted that the constituent structure of the sentence above is represented by the labelled bracketing:

$$S\,[_{np}\,[amar]_{np}\,]_{vp}\,[_{np}\,[mathabɛtha]_{np}\,[korche]_{v}\,]_{v}\,]_{vp}\,]_{S}$$

amar is therefore not a possessive genitive modifying mathab tha.

III. The Noun Phrase

The possessive genitive comes initially in the NP and the case marker comes finally. The underlying representations of these elements will not be treated here. The order of the remaining items in the NP depends on whether the NP is definite or not. What follows can be formulated more generally in generative terms but will be presented for the time being within the structural framework of this sketch: The definite NP expands as follows:

{(Demonstrative) / (Relative)} (Adjective) Noun (Numeral) {Article (ṭa, gulo, etc.) / Classifier (jon, khana, etc.)}

ei	bɔro	boi	car	ṭa
this	big	book	four	"the"

'these four big books'

In the indefinite NP the order is as follows:

(Numeral Classifier)		(Adjective)	Noun	
car	ṭa	bɔro	boi	'four big books'
four	"the"	big	book	

IV. The Verb Phrase

Adverbs precede the verb, normally in the order time, manner, place. The order of adverbs is not fixed with respect to objects.

1. Manner Adverbs

These can be either single morphemes (aste 'slowly') or an adjective and kore 'having done' (bhalo 'good' and kore = bhalo kore 'well').

2. Place Adverbs

Many of these are locatives of nouns denoting spatial relationships, thus opore 'above' from opor 'top'. These locatives function as post-positions governing the genitive case and are used to form longer adverbial phrases, e.g., chader opore 'on the roof'.

3. Time Adverbs

These again can be single morphemes (ɛkhon 'now') or post-positional phrases (chɔṭar pɔre 'after six').

V. The Sentence

1. The Simple Sentence

1.1. Declarative Sentence

The normal word order in the Bengali declarative sentence

is:

Subject	Indirect Object	Direct Object	Verb
ami	Ranake	boi	debo
I	to Rana	book	will give

'I will give Rana a book'

1.2. Nominal Sentence

In the present tense the nominal sentence contains no copula:

Rana	bhalo	chele	'Rana is a good boy'
Rana	good	boy	

In the past tense the copula is formed from the stem chi- (3rd person chilo 'was') and in the future from the stem hɔ- (3rd person hɔbe 'will be').

1.3. Imperative Sentence

There are special imperative forms for the second and third persons. In the second person there are different forms for the present and the future imperative. The subject of an imperative is generally deleted:

dekhi	'let me (us) see'
kɔro	'do (now)'
koro	'do (in the future)'

1.4. Impersonal Sentence

1.4.1. One kind of impersonal sentence has been discussed above in connection with the third type of compound verb. Another illustration is given below:

amar	kanna	peeche	'I feel like crying'
of me	crying	has found	

1.4.2. A second type of compound sentence involves a logical subject carrying out an action out of necessity. The necessary action is expressed by means of the infinitive and third person forms of hɔwa 'to be, become'. The logical subject appears either in the genitive or in the oblique:

amar / of me / amake / me	jete	hɔbe	'I will have to go'
	to go	will be	

1.5. Passive Sentence

Bengali has no regular way of forming a passive from an active sentence. There is an impersonal passive construction using the past passive participle and the verb hɔwa 'to be' or jawa 'to go'. The agent can be expressed as a genitive when the

verb is <u>hɔwa</u> and is in a perfect tense. No agent can be expressed when the verb is <u>jawa</u>.

boiṭa	pɔra	hɔe		'the book gets read'
the book	read	becomes		
boiṭa	amar	pɔra	hoeche	'the book has been read by me'
the book	of me	read	has become	
boiṭa	pɔra	jae		'the book can be read'
the book	read	goes		

In a similar construction using the past passive participle of a causative verb the agent is expressed in a postpositional phrase using the postposition <u>die</u> 'by, through':

Boiṭa oke die pɔrano jabe	'The book can be made to be read by him'
Boiṭa oke die pɔrano hɔbe	'The book will be made to be read by him'

1.6. Negative Sentence

The negative particle <u>na</u> follows the finite verb to form the negative of all tenses except the present perfect and the past perfect

ami kori, korbo, kortam na	'I don't, won't, didn't use to do'

To form the negative of the perfect tenses the particle <u>ni</u> is

added to the present tense of the verb:

tumi korecho and na ⇒ tumi kɔro ni 'you haven't done'

tumi korechile and na ⇒ tumi kɔro ni 'you hadn't done'

1.7.Question

1.7.1. Yes-No Question

Question words begin with k-, thus ki, ke, keno, kothae 'what, who, when, where'.

A sentence may be questioned in two ways, either by marking the simple declarative sentence with question intonation (rising on final syllable) or by using the unstressed interrogative particle ki either before or after the verb as shown:

tumi korecho?
tumi ki korecho? 'have you done?'
tumi korecho ki?

1.7.2. Wh-Question

To question a specific constituent of a sentence one replaces the item to be questioned with the corresponding interrogative. The structure of the sentence remains unchanged:

tumi ki khao? 'what do you eat?'
tumi kothae thako? 'where do you live?'

Note that the interrogative pronoun ki is always stressed.

2. The Complex Sentence

2.1. Conjoined Sentences

Sentences may be conjoined using conjunctions ar 'and', kintu 'but', karon 'because', etc.

ami asbo ar tumi asbe	'I'll come and you'll come'
ami asbo kintu tumi asbe na	'I'll come but you won't'
ami asbo karon tumi asbe	'I'll come because you will'

Where the clauses to be conjoined have identical subjects and the conjunction is ar, the following construction using the past participle active and denoting sequential action is more usual:

ami	bari	phire	juto	khule	khater
I	home	having returned	shoe	having taken off	of the bed

upor	bose	boi	pori
on top	having sat	book	read

'I get home, take off my shoes, sit on top of the bed and read a book.'

Note that in such a sentence the tense of the sequence is determined entirely by the finite verb. This construction is, of

course, analogous to the one described below in which the conditional participle denotes a temporal sequence rather than a condition. The difference is that the past participle type is reserved for clauses with the same subject. (Compound verbs of type 3 are a special case of this kind of conjunction.) A clause expressing cause may precede the clause expressing effect, but in that case the petrified participle bole 'because' (literally 'having said') must be used in place of karon and after the verb.

ami asbo bole ora aste caeni
I will come because they to come did not want
'They didn't want to come because I'm coming.'

nek kaj koreche bole ora klanto
much work have done because they tired
'They're tired because they've done a lot of work.'

*karon ami asbo ora aste caeni

2.2. Relative Sentences

2.2.1. Non-restrictive Relative Clauses

The noun to be relativized has placed before it the relative pronoun je which, as stated above, patterns like a demonstrative. The coreferential noun in the main clause is pronominalized to the syntactically appropriate form of the pronoun se. The relative clause generally precedes the main clause.

je lokti eseche se ekhon khacche
what man has come he now
'The man who came is now eating.'

2.2.2. Restrictive Relative Clauses

The main clause remains unchanged. The noun to be relativized is replaced by the pronoun je 'who' and the clause is inserted after the antecedent noun in the main clause.

lokti, jake ami kal dekhechi, khacche
the man whom I yesterday saw is eating
'The man, whom I saw yesterday, is eating.'

2.2.3. Relative Adjectives and Adverbs

These occur in pairs and behave in much the same way as relative pronouns:

tumi jɔkhon jabe amio tɔkhon jabo
you when will go I too then will go
'When you go I'll go too.'

tumi jɔto phɔl khabe amio tɔto phɔl
you as much fruit will eat I too that much fruit

khabo
will eat

'I'll eat as much fruit as you.'

Bengali also has the indefinite relative pronouns je keu 'whoever', ja kichu 'whatever'.

2.3. Indirect Discourse

2.3.1. Reported Declarative Sentences

In reported speech the tenses remain the same as in direct speech. The pronouns in the reported clause are altered when necessary. The reported clause is optionally introduced by the conjunction je 'that':

o boleche (je) kal asbe
he has said (that) tomorrow will come
'He said he'd come tomorrow.'

2.3.1. Reported Questions

To form an indirect question the interrogative particle ki is replaced by the compound particle kina 'whether' which follows the verb:

o jiges korlo ami asbo kina
he question made I will come whether
'He asked whether I'd come.'

2.4. Conditional Sentences

Conditional sentences may be formed by using the conjunction jodi 'if' and the resumptive tɔbe, ta hole 'then, in that case', or by using the conditional participle:

o jodi ase tɔbe ami cole jabo
he if comes then I will go away

o ele ami cole jabo
he if comes I will go away

'If he comes I'll go away.'

(The second sentence above is ambiguous in that it can also mean 'After he comes I'll go away.') The word order shown in the first sentence is the usual one, but the position of jodi is not fixed. In negative conditional clauses the particle na precedes the verb:

o jodi na ase ta hole ami asbo na
he if not comes then I will not come
'I won't come if he doesn't come.'

In either type of conditional clause forms of the root ach- 'be' are replaced by forms of thak- 'stay':

o ache 'he is (there)' but o jodi thake 'if he is (there)'

This extends to the perfect tenses in which the root ach- (ch-) appears as part of the finite form, so that:

o eseche 'he has come' but o jodi ese thake 'if he has come' not *o jodi eseche.

There is no corresponding paraphrase with thak- for the continuous tenses and these simply may not appear in a conditional sentence.

2.5. Temporal Clauses and Assorted Embeddings

Embedded temporal clauses belong to the general class of embeddings in which the finite verb of the subordinate clause is replaced by a non-finite form. In the case of temporal clauses the non-finite form in question is the verbal noun, whose case is determined by the particular temporal postposition used. The embedded clause can appear initially, immediately after the subject or finally. The subject of an embedded temporal clause is obligatorily deleted:

kolkata jaoar pɔr Rana amake cithi likhlo
Calcutta of going after Rana me letter wrote
'After going to Calcutta Rana wrote me a letter.'

Also: Rana kolkata jaoar pɔr amake cithi likhlo
Rana amake cithi likhlo kolkata jaoar pɔr.
*o kolkata jaoar pɔr Rana amake cithi likhlo etc.

jaoar age 'before going', jaoa obdhi 'until going', jaoa maltro 'as soon as going'. Other embeddings using non-finite forms are

illustrated below:

(1) Verbal Noun -- Nominative or Direct

tomar erokom kɔra ṭa amar bhalo lageni
your this way doing of me good did not strike
'Your acting this way didn't please me.'

Oblique -- here the verbal noun is a complement

tomar erokom kɔrake ami bhalo mone kori na
this way doing I good consider not
'I don't consider your acting this way good.'

Locative

tumi erokom kɔrate ami khusi hoini
you this way in doing I pleased was not
'I wasn't pleased at your acting in this way.'

Genitive

tomar okhane jaoar dɔrkar nei
of you there of going need is not
'There is no need for you to go there.'

ami kaj korbar jonno ekhane esechi
I work of doing for purpose here have come
'I've come here to work.'

(2) Infinitive

ami ekhane kaj korte esechi
I here work to do have come
'I've come here to work.'

Reflexives:

The most common way of forming reflexives is by using the reflexive pronoun nij 'self' which is unmarked for person.

nijeder kaj ses kore ora bari cole gelo
own work having finished they home went away
'Having finished their own work they went home.'

o nijeke dekhlo
he himself saw
'He saw himself.'